Political Socialization

LO3 Explain the influence of the agents of early socialization—family, school, community, and peers—on political learning.

political socialization
The complex process by which people acquire their political values.

Public opinion is grounded in political values. People acquire their values through **political socialization**, a complex process through which individuals become aware of politics, learn political facts, and form political values. Think for a moment about your political socialization. What is your earliest memory of a president? When did you first learn about political parties? If you identify with a party, how did you decide to do so? If you do not, why don't you? Who was the first liberal or conservative you ever met? Do you and your parents have a similar political outlook?

Obviously, the paths to political awareness, knowledge, and values vary among individuals, but most people are exposed to the same sources of influence, or agents of socialization, especially from childhood through young adulthood: family, school, community, peers, and the media.

The Agents of Early Socialization

Like psychologists, scholars of political socialization place great emphasis on early learning. Both groups point to two fundamental principles that characterize early learning:[22]

- *The primacy principle.* What is learned first is learned best.
- *The structuring principle.* What is learned first structures later learning.

The extent of the influence of any socializing agent depends on the extent of our exposure to it, our communication with it, and our receptivity to it. Because most people learn first from their family, the family tends to be an important agent of political socialization.

Family. In most cases, exposure, communication, and receptivity are highest in parent-child relationships. From their parents, children learn a wide range of values—social, moral, religious, economic, and political—that help shape their opinions. It is not surprising, then, that most people link their earliest memories of politics with their family. Moreover, when parents are interested in politics and maintain a favorable home environment for studying public affairs, they influence their children to become politically interested and informed.

One of the most politically important things that many children learn from their parents is party identification, a phenomenon known as the *transmission model* of partisanship. They learn party identification in much the same way as they do religion. Children (very young children, anyway) imitate their parents. When parents share the same religion, children are almost always raised in that faith. When parents are of different religions, their children are more likely to follow one or the other than to choose an entirely different religion. Similarly, parental influence on party identification is greater

when both parents strongly identify with the same party.[23] Transmission doesn't just occur because parents and children live in the same environment and share the same race, class, and other social characteristics. Over and above these similarities, the way in which parents do or do not talk about politics in the home exerts a strong influence on how children acquire political views. Children whose partisanship is transmitted from their parents also exhibit higher levels of partisan stability throughout their lives compared to children whose views were not shaped by their parents.

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IMAGE 5.3 Like Mother, Like Daughter

Even though many kids like to think of themselves as rebels, politics is one area where rebellion is more myth than reality. If your parents are Democrats, you probably will be too. If your parents are politically active, chances are, you'll find yourself taking your own kids to the polls as well.

School. Schools have also been shown to influence political learning. Here, however, we have to distinguish between elementary and secondary schools, on the one hand, and institutions of higher education, on the other. Elementary schools prepare children in a number of ways to accept the social order. They introduce authority figures outside the family: the teacher, principal, police officer. They also teach the nation's slogans and symbols: the Pledge of Allegiance, the national anthem, national heroes, and holidays. And they stress the norms of group behavior and democratic decision making: respecting the opinions of others, voting for class officers. In the process, they teach youngsters about the value of political equality. Children do not always understand the meaning of the patriotic rituals and behaviors they learn in elementary school. In fact, much of this early learning—in the United States and elsewhere—is more indoctrination than education. By the end of the eighth grade, however, children begin to distinguish between political leaders and government institutions. They become more aware of collective institutions, such as Congress and elections, than do younger children, who tend to focus on the president and other single figures of government authority. In sum, most children emerge from elementary school with a sense of national pride and an idealized notion of American government.

Although many secondary schools emphasize citizens' rights in addition to their responsibilities, high schools also attempt to build "good citizens." Field trips to the state legislature or the city council impress students with the majesty and power of government institutions. But secondary schools also offer more explicit political content in their curricula, including courses in recent U.S. history, civics, and American government. Teachers challenge students to think critically about American government and politics and focus on teaching civic responsibilities. The end product is a greater awareness of the political process and of the most prominent participants in that process. Students who have been taught skills such as letter writing and debating are more likely to participate in politics.[24]

Political learning at the college level can be much like that in high school, or it can be quite different. The degree of difference is greater if professors (or the texts they use) encourage their students to question authority. Questioning dominant political values does not necessarily mean rejecting them. For example, this text encourages

you to recognize that freedom and equality, two values idealized in our culture, often conflict. It also invites you to think of democracy in terms of competing institutional models, one of which challenges the idealized notion of democracy. These alternative perspectives are meant to teach you about American political values, not to subvert those values. College courses that are intended to stimulate critical thinking have the potential to introduce students to political ideas that are radically different from those they bring to class. However, some specialists in socialization contend that taking particular courses in college has little effect on attitude change, which is more likely to come from sustained interactions with classmates who hold different views.[25]

Community and Peers. Your community and your peers are different but usually overlapping groups. Your community is the people of all ages with whom you come in contact because they live or work near you. Peers are your friends, classmates, and coworkers. Usually they are your age and live or work within your community. The makeup of a community has a lot to do with how the political opinions of its members are formed. Homogeneous communities—those whose members are similar in ethnicity, race, religion, or occupation—can exert strong pressures on both children and adults to conform to the dominant attitude. For example, if all your neighbors praise the candidates of one party and criticize the candidates of the other, it is difficult to voice or even hold a dissenting opinion. Additionally, white Americans who live in diverse communities are more prone to hold less favorable attitudes about racial and ethnic minorities (and about policies related to race and ethnicity), unless the community diversity leads to the formation of genuine friendships across racial lines.[26]

For both children and adults, peer groups sometimes provide a defense against community pressures. Adolescent peer groups are particularly effective protection against parental pressures. In adolescence, children rely on their peers to defend their dress and their lifestyle, not their politics. At the college level, however, peer group influence on political attitudes often grows substantially, sometimes fed by new information that clashes with parental beliefs. As noted at the start of this chapter, the increasing presence of diverse social networks in the U.S. leads some to expect a future in which racial issues become less divisive.

Continuing Socialization. Political socialization continues throughout life. As parental and school influences wane in adulthood, peer groups (neighbors, coworkers, club members) assume a greater importance in promoting political awareness and developing political opinions. For example, the extent to which politics is discussed in the workplace can shape public opinion. Research indicates that workplaces offer a valuable opportunity to interact with people who have differing political perspectives. Such encounters lead people to be more tolerant of different points of view. Alternatively, workplaces in which most people share the same partisan outlook can lead people to become more extreme in their political views.[27]

Because adults usually learn about political events from the mass media—newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the Web—the media emerge as socialization agents. Older Americans are more likely to rely on newspaper and television news for political information, while younger Americans are more likely to turn to the Internet. The mass media are so important in the political socialization of both children and adults that we devote a whole chapter—Chapter 6—to a discussion of their role.

Regardless of how people learn about politics, they gain perspective on government as they grow older. They are likely to measure new candidates (and new ideas) against those they remember. Their values also change, increasingly reflecting their own self-interest. As voters age, for example, they begin to see more merit in government spending for Social Security than they did when they were younger. Generational differences in values and historical experience translate into different public policy preferences.

Finally, political education comes simply through exposure and familiarity. One example is voting, which people do with increasing regularity as they grow older.

Social Groups and Political Values

LO4 Compare and contrast the effects of education, income, region, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender on public opinion.

No two people are influenced by precisely the same socialization agents or in precisely the same way. Each individual experiences a unique process of political socialization and forms a unique set of political values. Yet as we noted at the start of this chapter, people with similar backgrounds do share similar experiences, which means they tend to develop similar political opinions. In this section, we examine the ties between people's social background and their political values. In the process, we examine the ties between background and values by looking at responses to two questions posed by the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES).[28] Many questions in the survey tap the freedom-versus-order or freedom-versus-equality dimensions. The two we chose serve to illustrate the analysis of ideological types. These specific questions do not define or exhaust the typology; they merely illustrate it.

The first question dealt with abortion. The interviewer said, "There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which opinion on this page best agrees with your view?":

1. "By law, abortion should never be permitted" [12 percent agreed].
2. "The law should permit abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger" [28 percent agreed].
3. "The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established" [18 percent agreed].
4. "By law, a woman should be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice" [43 percent agreed].[29]

Those who chose the last category most clearly valued individual freedom over order imposed by government. Evidence shows that pro-choice respondents also tend to have concerns about broader issues of social order, such as the role of women and the legitimacy of alternative lifestyles.[30]

The second question posed by the 2012 ANES pertained to the role of government in guaranteeing employment:

> Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Suppose that these people are at one end of the scale. . . . Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on his own. Suppose these people were at the other end. . . . Where would you put yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

Excluding respondents who "hadn't thought much" about this question, 28 percent wanted the government to provide every person with a good standard of living, and 23 percent were undecided. That left 49 percent who wanted the government to let people "get ahead" on their own. These respondents valued freedom over government efforts to promote equality.

Together it seems that most people are inclined to value freedom over order or equality. About 61 percent felt that the government should permit abortions in many,

if not all, instances while only 39 percent felt government should forbid or severely restrict abortions, and a near-majority thinks people should get ahead on their own efforts without much government aid. However, differences in attitudes emerged for both issues when the respondents were grouped by socioeconomic factors: education, income, region, race, religion, and sex. The differences are shown in Figure 5.4 as positive and negative deviations from the national average for each question. Bars that extend to the right identify groups that are more likely than most other Americans to sacrifice freedom for order (on the left-hand side of the figure) or equality (on the right-hand side). Next, we examine the opinion patterns more closely for each socioeconomic group.

Education

Education increases people's awareness and understanding of political issues. Higher education also promotes tolerance of unpopular opinions and behavior and invites citizens to see issues in terms of civil rights and liberties.[31] This result is clearly shown in the left-hand column of Figure 5.4, which shows that people with less education are more likely to support outlawing abortions, while those with more education view abortion as a matter of a woman's choice.[32] When confronted with a choice between personal freedom and social order, college-educated individuals tend to choose freedom.

With regard to the role of government in reducing income inequality, the right-hand column in Figure 5.4 shows that people with less education favor government action to guarantee jobs and a good standard of living. Those with more education oppose government action, favoring freedom over equality. You might expect better educated people to be humanitarian and to support government programs to help the needy. However, because educated people tend to be wealthier, they would be taxed more heavily for such government programs. Moreover, they may believe that it is unrealistic to expect government to make such economic guarantees.

Income

In many countries, differences in social class, based on social background and occupation, divide people in their politics.[33] In the United States, the majority of citizens regard themselves as "middle class." Yet, as Figure 5.4 shows, wealth is linked to opinions favoring a limited government role in promoting both equality and order. Those with lower incomes are more likely to favor government guarantees of employment and living conditions. Those with incomes under $60,000 also favor outlawing abortions more than those earning over $60,000. For both issues, wealth and education tend to have a similar effect on opinion: the groups with more education and higher income favor freedom.

Region

Early in our country's history, regional differences were politically important-important enough to spark a civil war between the North and South. For nearly a hundred years after the Civil War, regional differences continued to affect American politics. The moneyed Northeast was thought to control the purse strings of capitalism. The Midwest was long regarded as the stronghold of isolationism in foreign affairs. The South was virtually a one-party region, almost completely Democratic. And the individualistic West pioneered its own mixture of progressive politics.

In the past, differences in wealth fed cultural differences between these regions. In recent decades, however, the movement of people and wealth away from the Northeast and Midwest to the Sunbelt states in the South and Southwest has equalized the per capita income of the various regions. One result of this equalization is that the formerly "solid South" is no longer solidly Democratic. In fact, the South has tended to vote for Republican presidential candidates since 1968, and the majority of southern congressmen are now Republicans. Political differences between the South and the rest of the country today are often rooted in attitudes about racial politics and social issues in addition to attitudes about the economy.[34]

John Moore/Getty Images

IMAGE 5.4 In the Eye of the Beholder

In 2015, racial differences in public opinion were on full display when the state of South Carolina decided to remove the Confederate flag from its statehouse. Polls show that in 2015, 66 percent of whites see the flag as a symbol of southern pride, while 72 percent of blacks see it as a symbol of racism.

Source: "Poll: Majority Sees Confederate Flag as Southern Pride Symbol, Not Racist," CNN.com, http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/02/politics/confederate-flag-poll-racism-southern-pride/.

Figure 5.4 shows public opinion on both an economic and a social issue in the four major regions of the United States. It shows that differences are more pronounced on the social issue: people in the South and Midwest were more likely to favor restricting abortion than people in the Northeast or the West, yet regional differences were minimal regarding government efforts to ensure a decent standard of living.

Ethnicity and Race

Over the course of American history, individuals of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds have differed with respect to political values and opportunities. In the early twentieth century, the major ethnic minorities in America were composed of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Germany, Poland, and other European countries who came to the United States in waves during the late 1800s and early 1900s. These immigrants entered a nation that had been founded by British settlers more than a hundred years earlier. They found themselves in a strange land, usually without money and unable to speak the language. Moreover, their religious backgrounds—mainly Catholic and Jewish—differed from that of the predominantly Protestant earlier settlers. These urban ethnics and their descendants became part of the great coalition of Democratic voters that President Franklin Roosevelt forged in the 1930s. And for years after, the European ethnics supported liberal candidates and causes more strongly than the original Anglo-Saxon immigrants did.[35]

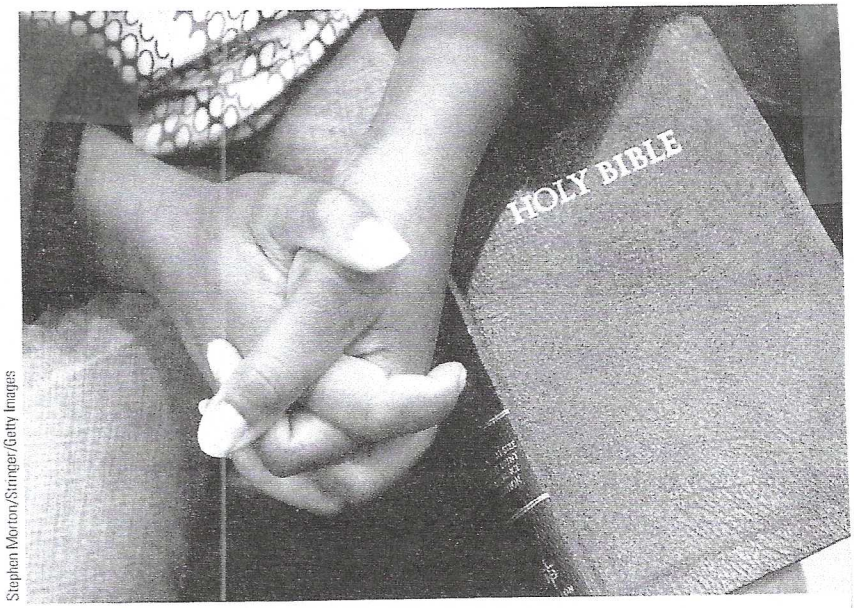
From the Civil War through the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans fought to secure basic political rights such as the right to vote. Initially mobilized by the Republican Party—the party of Lincoln—following the Civil War, African Americans forged strong ties with the Democratic Party during the New Deal era. Today, African Americans are still more likely to support liberal candidates and identify with the Democratic Party. African Americans constitute 13 percent of the population, with sizable voting blocs in northern cities and in southern states like Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana. Over 88 percent of African Americans voted for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton in 2016.[36]

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, non-Hispanic whites comprised 62 percent of the population in 2014. As we noted earlier, the country is projected to become majority-minority by 2044.[37] Latinos, people of Latin American origin, now make up the largest minority group in the United States: 17.4 percent in 2014. They consist of both whites and nonwhites and are commonly but inaccurately regarded as a racial group. Latinos are projected to be 28.6 percent of the population in 2060.[38] At the national level, Latinos (consisting of groups as different as Cubans, Mexicans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans) have lagged behind African Americans in mobilizing and gaining political office. However, they constitute 46 percent of the population in New Mexico and 38 percent in California and Texas—where they have fared better in politics.[39] Like African Americans, Latinos tend to align with the Democratic Party. Over 65 percent of Latino voters voted for Clinton in 2016.[40]

Both Asians and Native Americans account for another 6 percent of the population (5.4 percent Asian; .7 percent Native American). Like other minority groups, their political impact is greatest in cities or regions where they are concentrated and greater in number. For instance, Asian Americans constitute 39 percent of the population in Hawaii and 13 percent in California; Native Americans make up 12 percent of the population of California and 9 percent of Oklahoma.[41] The Asian population in the country overall is expected to increase to 9.1 percent by 2060 while the Native American population is expected to remain the same.[42] Studying the political attitudes of both of these groups is often difficult due to their small number, linguistic diversity, and geographic dispersion. Nonetheless, Asians, like other nonwhites, display a clear preference for Democrats over Republicans, with roughly 65 percent of Asian American voters voting for Clinton in 2016.[43] Information on Native Americans' voting preferences is harder to come by, but estimates suggest that they too vote heavily Democratic.[44]

Religion

Religion is another factor that can have a significant impact on public opinion. Today, 49 percent of the population is Protestant or non-Catholic Christian, 21 percent is Catholic, and fewer than 2 percent is Jewish. Almost 23 percent of Americans today claim to be "unaffiliated" with respect to religion, a figure that has grown rapidly in the twenty-first century.[48] Less than 1 percent of the population was Muslim in 2014, a figure that is expected to rise to about 1.7 percent by 2030.[49] For many years, analysts found strong and consistent differences in the political opinions of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.[50] Protestants were more conservative than Catholics, and Catholics tended to be more conservative than Jews. There have been few surveys of the Muslim population in the United States, though one recent study found that Muslim Americans are more likely to favor "big government" than the rest of the population, and largely consider themselves Democrats.[51]



Stephen Morton/Stringer/Getty Images

IMAGE 5.5 Word of God?

A person's religiosity may be as important as his or her denominational identification in predicting political opinions. One measure of people's religiosity in a Christian-Judaic society is their opinion about the Bible. When asked about the nature of the Bible in 2012, about 34 percent of respondents said it was the actual word of God and should be taken literally. About 46 percent regarded it as the word of God but believed it should not be taken literally, and 20 percent viewed it as written by men. Among those who believe that the Bible was written by men, 45 percent say that global warming is mainly a product of human activity; among those who believe the Bible is the word of God and should be taken literally, that figure drops to 20 percent. People who think the Bible was written by men were also fifty points more likely than people who say it should be taken literally to believe that abortion should be legal as a matter of personal choice.

Source: 2012 American National Election Study, undertaken in collaboration by Stanford University and the University of Michigan, face-to-face sample.

As Figure 5.4 indicates, such broad religious groupings affect attitudes about economic equality and social order. Protestants ("Other Christian") favor government action to limit abortion even more than Catholics. Non-Christians and people who are not religious overwhelmingly favor a woman's right to choose. Differences among religious subgroups have emerged across many contemporary social and political issues. Evangelical Protestants are more likely than members of other religious groups to oppose gay marriage and support the death penalty while favoring the right to life over abortion. Evangelicals and Jews are more likely to express support for Israel in Middle Eastern politics.

Gender

Men and women differ with respect to their political opinions on a broad array of social and political issues, though their views are similar on the two items depicted in Figure 5.4. Surveys show that women are consistently more supportive than men are of gay marriage, environmental policies, and government spending for social programs. They are consistently less supportive of the death penalty and of going to war.[52] Contemporary politics is marked by a "gender gap": women tend to identify with the Democratic Party more than men do, and they are much more likely than men to vote for Democratic presidential candidates. In the 2016 general election, Clinton won the support of 54 percent of female voters but only 41 percent of male voters.[53]